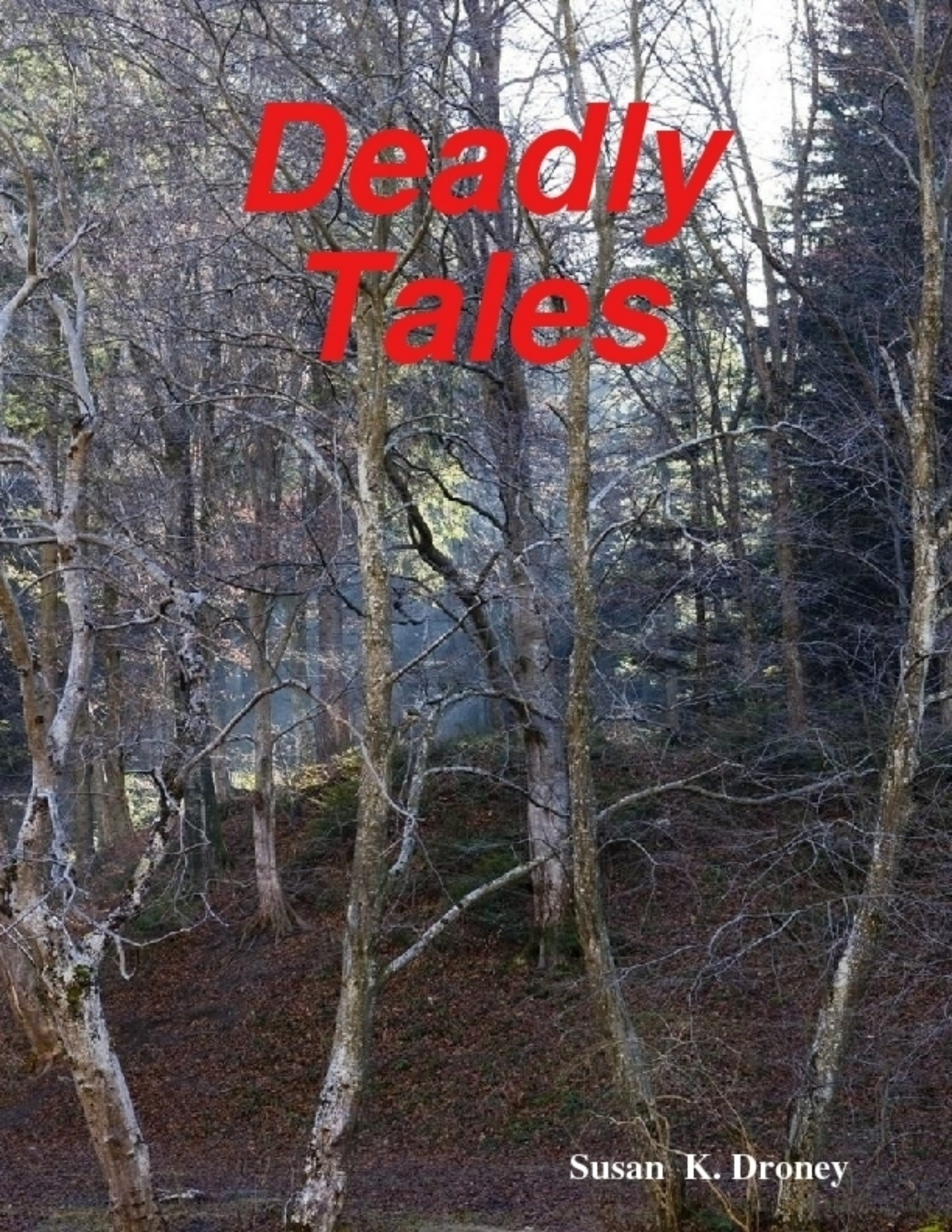
Deadly
Tales
Susan K. Droney

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by

Susan K. Droney

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The Ducks

Joe Butcher, shoulders slightly slumped, walked slowly, occasionally stumbling, until he reached the end of the path. He shielded his eyes and looked across the vast glimmering pond. He squinted. *There they were.* A smile broke across his face. He waved his arms like a wild man. They were his friends, the only friends he had left in this cold miserable world. But he didn't want to think about that now. This moment here, right now in time, was his sanctuary.

Keeping his eyes glued on them, he pulled a few slices of bread from his pocket. They would come, but not until their leader gave the order. He'd given them all names, but the leader was his favorite. He'd named her Sally--after his mother, a take-charge woman who had never waited for anyone to do her bidding, but became the leader in almost everything in which she had been involved. He'd held his mother in the highest esteem. There seemed to be no undertaking too difficult for her. She had been a strong woman, the strongest he'd ever known.

He watched Sally's webbed feet as she waddled towards him, squawking as her eyes beheld the customary feast in his hands. He laughed as she drew closer. "Look what I have for you, Sally."

She grabbed the bread from his hand. The other ducks stood behind her until she'd had her fill, then watched as she stepped aside. They hungrily devoured the remains of the bread she'd left for them.

For the past six months Joe had pondered this strange behavior, but could come up with no logical explanation. It didn't make sense. He pored over books in the library and traveled to several duck ponds, but none of those ducks acted like Sally did. She was the ultimate leader. Joe watched carefully as her followers finished eating, then looked at her. They didn't move. They never did until she gave the signal…a slight nod of her head. Sally eyed him cautiously, then tilted her head, and led the group back to the other side of the pond.

Joe sat on the grass brooding about his life, a life that no longer held any meaning for him. He was terrified. He had no friends, but he couldn't blame anyone for not wanting to befriend him. He'd never let anyone get close. His career had been his life and he'd barked orders and made demands of

his employees never taking the time to realize that they had lives and responsibilities outside of their jobs.

Money and making more of it was all he'd ever cared about even if it meant cutting corners and putting many of those employed by him out of work. He'd never given a second thought to any of the employees who passed through his office door, pleading with him for their jobs. "Downsizing," he told them, then closed their files without giving them a second thought. He ignored their pained eyes as his own bore like arrows through them. Now he wondered what had become of them. If only he'd listened. If only his heart hadn't been so hardened.

What about Mary Wilkins, the middle-aged mother trying to raise her family and be sole supporter after her husband's young life was tragically snuffed out years before? Had he even cared how she would feed her children? And then there was Cody Lawrence, a boy fresh out of college. He'd given up a lucrative position with another firm after Joe promised him a secure position. But the position failed to materialize after six months and Cody was cut loose with not even an apology. What about the countless others who, once nearing retirement, were suddenly snatched from their jobs and their financial security pulled from them?

Yes, Joe remembered seeing the shock and fear in their eyes, but he'd dismissed them from his office and from his thoughts. After all, he reasoned, they weren't his problem. They could find positions elsewhere. But how many had? How many had been pushed over the edge? He'd read a few obituaries in the papers, but still, he took no responsibility. They were weak and his company was better off without employees like them. Had any of them ended up like he now was? Alone and frightened?

Of course he wasn't entirely alone. He had Stella. He didn't let his wife, Stella, know immediately how bad things really were, but he suspected she knew they were in some financial trouble, but he could never tell her just how deep. He'd refinanced the house and cashed in most of his life insurance policies just to keep her in the life style to which she'd become accustomed in their thirty years of marriage.

His eyes narrowed as he recalled the conversation six months ago with the president of his company. He thought he was getting a much-deserved promotion, but instead he was handed the familiar pink slip, the one he'd given to so many past employees, and told it was no reflection on his work

with the company, but downsizing. He'd felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach.

A month after he'd lost his job, he broke the news to Stella. Her reaction surprised him. She'd cheerfully told him that with his qualifications he'd get more offers for employment than he'd know what to do with. Her prediction hadn't come true. Still, everyday, when he returned from pounding the pavement, she'd say the same thing. "Tomorrow you'll find a job, Joe. Don't worry." But worry he did until his once healthy, broad face had shrunken and become drawn.

His two grown sons had offered financial support, but Joe wouldn't hear of it. It wasn't right for parents to take from their children. He'd always been the provider for his family and he didn't intend to change that. But he'd exhausted his supply of contacts. He humbled himself and went begging to his former competitors. He saw the nervous looks in their eyes. They knew that what happened to Joe could happen to them without warning. There was no security. Most of all, though, he'd be the last man on earth they'd give a job to.

He rubbed his eyes as the guilt of years gone by tormented him. He rarely slept, but lay in bed tossing and turning until the light of day forced him out of bed and back out on the streets. Dreams plagued him when he did manage to snatch a few minutes of slumber. The haunted eyes of the men and women he'd fired passed before him. It wouldn't stop. It was like an endless parade. He was certain that was what his eyes now looked like to others. He knew how those men and women felt. God, he knew how they felt.

Sometimes he thought he was losing his mind. Sally seemed to eye him with those same eyes. Or at least that's what his mind told him. At the end of each day he walked into the kitchen, shook his head no to Stella, then grabbed a few slices of bread from the breadbox and walked down to his pond. A few times Stella had offered to join him, but he lovingly explained that this was the time of day he needed to be alone and gather his thoughts for the next day. She softly kissed his cheek as he left through the back door. She always had the same bright, optimistic comment that things would be better tomorrow. He'd pat her hand and tell her yes, everything would work out, but with each passing day he knew time was running out. It was over. He was washed up. It was only a matter of time before they lost

their home. Where would they go? He couldn't bear losing his beloved duck pond. He couldn't bear never seeing Sally again.

Tomorrow he'd receive his last unemployment check. He'd cashed in the balance of his retirement fund two months ago, and even if he was old enough to collect his social security, it wouldn't be nearly enough to keep up the life style Stella still insisted upon. He'd thought about selling the house and land before they lost it, but he couldn't give up his ducks. For the past ten years they'd been his peace. They were the friends he'd never allowed himself to have. They were the friends he told his problems to. Stella routinely spent most of her mornings with the ducks, but the afternoons were his time.

He wondered if Stella confided in them the way he did. Maybe that's why she didn't seem worried about their financial predicament. The ducks gave him a serenity he couldn't explain. No, he couldn't sell this place, but he wouldn't go without a fight either if it came to that.

That night he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Sleep refused to come, so after an hour of tossing and turning, he climbed out of bed. He made coffee and then sat at the kitchen table, scribbling figures in a book. Years ago Stella and he had planned to someday retire to Florida; that was, until they bought this house. Stella had hinted over the past couple of years that they might be better staying right where they were. After all, she reasoned, what more could they want? They had their beautiful pond and their ducks. Did she still feel that way? She had no clue how bad off they really were. As much as he vowed to fight to stay here, looking at the figures written in the notebook, he knew they couldn't. Why let the bank take their home? He could get enough out of it to at least make the move. It would be hard leaving the ducks, but unless some financial windfall came soon, there was no other choice.

He'd have to convince Stella that it was the right thing to do. There was no other way out of this mess. They had friends in Florida. Well, Stella did. It wouldn't be so bad. If they were careful they could make it. And maybe he could find a part-time job. After all, no one knew him personally there, except for Stella's few friends. Friends were something Joe now wished he'd spent more time cultivating instead of putting all of his efforts into his work. It angered him that he'd given his life to a company that ended up stabbing him in the back. He'd worked for someone else his whole life watching the powerful bastard get rich on his efforts. He shook. He couldn't

stop shivering. He didn't know if it was because of the rage boiling inside of him for being used all these years or from fear of the unknown.

He didn't blame others for disliking and distrusting him. They perceived him as cold and uncaring. And he had been. He'd given too many people the ax after he'd driven them like slaves for years. He'd never praised them or thanked them for a job well done. He'd been that way with anyone he'd encountered. He'd watched waitresses literally cringe when he walked into the local diner. At the time he perceived it as a sign of power. Yes, he'd earned himself quite a reputation. A reputation that had now turned on him. He never thought he'd end up like this. Now he wished he had it all to do over again. He'd certainly be a different man. But it was too late. No one cared for or about him. He heard the whispers behind his back. No one understood why Stella had stayed with him all these years. But she had and he'd never questioned it. Love was strange. And he knew she loved him. Or did she really? Maybe it was the lifestyle she really loved.

Joe rubbed his temples. He'd lorded his power and authority over his employees and now he walked in their shoes. He certainly didn't like the fit. He closed his eyes, but popped them open again when the haunted eyes pierced his memory. He slammed his fist on the table. Mr. Perkins looked at him the same way he'd looked at those men and women. There was no compassion or sympathy. Just a cold, uncaring look.

He glanced at the clock. He'd been sitting here for hours. He stretched his aching legs. He needed some air. Everything was closing in on him and he was suffocating. He didn't wait for Stella to get up, but scribbled her a quick note telling her he wanted to get an early start.

Joe parked his car in a parking garage in the middle of the business district, and then walked slowly down the busy streets, looking at others hustling to get to their jobs. He envied them. Every one of them. Even those with jobs he'd always felt were beneath him. Now he felt nothing but the pain of shame and humiliation. He knew what people were thinking and saying behind his back. No one felt sorry for him. Why should they? He got what he deserved. What goes around comes around. He would feel the pangs of poverty and know what it felt like to go without. He swallowed hard. He felt like crying. Now wouldn't that give them something to talk about? Joe Butcher walking around Main Street crying his heart out. He'd surely be put in a mental hospital if he did.

He walked for what seemed like an eternity, then headed back to his house. He laid the check on the table. Stella looked at him, but didn't say a word. Did she know this was the last unemployment check and that their bank account was almost drained? He'd tell her later about his plans to sell the house, but not now. He needed to get down to the pond, to his friends. He looked into his wife's eyes. Something was wrong. She didn't make her usual comment. In fact, she kept silent. Her eyes gave him the chills. He'd never seen her look at him like that before. It unnerved him.

When he reached the pond, he smiled as Sally and her gang headed toward him. He waved as they neared, then put his hand into his pocket. Oh no! He'd forgotten the bread. He'd never before forgotten her bread. Sally was inches away from him, squawking as she looked toward his empty hand. He watched as she stopped, then turned to her followers. After a few seconds she turned back to him.

Joe's stomach lurched when he looked into her eyes. He'd never seen Sally's eyes so filled with hatred. "Sorry, Sally," he whispered hoarsely. "Let me go back to the house and get some." For some odd reason he sensed that Sally knew that if he went back to the house he would never return. That had been his thought, but how could a duck know that? No, he definitely was losing his mind. Her eyes never changed as she inched closer.

He began to run, but stumbled and fell at the edge of the hill. He dug into the soft earth trying to pull himself up. He felt a sharp sting on his arm and screamed when he saw the flesh being torn from his forearm. He swung his arm, but the duck refused to let go. He screamed again, but knew that no one would hear him. This was the price he'd paid for his solitude far away from everyone.

The ducks were all over him now, pinning him to the ground and pecking at every part of his body. He shrieked as the skin was ripped from his body. He was on his back now and he tried to shield his face, but they pecked at his hands and fingers. joe stared in horror. Dozens of eyes stared back at him, eyes filled with coldness and hatred. The same look that had been in Stella's eyes. The ducks covered him. He couldn't breathe. Blood spurted from his body. He tasted it on his lips. He was growing weak. Sally moved closer. She was directly above his head. She came closer her eyes inches from his. *Stella's eyes!* Blood caught in his throat as his curdled screams pierced the quiet countryside.

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Stella stirred her cup of tea as she glanced at the life insurance policy she'd taken out on Joe a few years ago. Yes, that was after he'd told her about his plans for them to eventually retire to Florida. "No one will take me away from my ducks," she said with a broad smile. "No one."

The Ticket

Rosie sat at her desk, head down appearing to be deeply involved with a report, which lay spread out on the scuffed desktop. Occasionally, she raised her eyes and stole peeks at her boss, Harry Ranko, as he stomped around the office barking his usual orders and ranting and raving about how he should just fire the lot of them. She glanced at her two co-workers. Janey, the boss' private secretary, was a mousy looking woman in her mid-thirties who always looked like she would burst into tears at any moment. She was single and her only goal in life was to land a husband who would make all her dreams come true. So far he'd been eluding her and Rosie suspected that Janey set her standards a little too high. She wondered what the mystery man would receive in return. He'd definitely be getting the short end of the stick, she thought.

John, a tall gangling college student worked part time and Ranko's outbursts never rattled him. He'd mentioned several times to Rosie that he planned to someday land a job as president of a large corporation and Ranko provided him with valuable hands on experience. How this would help John in his future endeavors Rosie couldn't figure out. But then John was young and idealistic with his whole future in front of him. Secretly she envied him that.

Rosie was the receptionist/bookkeeper of Ranko Investments. She was well aware that her physical appearance was nondescript and that she looked ten years older than her true age of fifty-five. She was the type of person that no one remembered. Her personal life was difficult, but she could still be counted on to greet the clients with a cheery hello and patiently listen to the joys and tragedies in Jane's and John's lives offering praise or condolences depending on the circumstances. But neither of them ever asked or even seemed to care how she was. They were self absorbed and only concerned with what was going on in their own lives. No one really knew Rosie, not the person she truly was deep down inside. She was just a name--Rosie Miller, the woman who worked overtime or gave up her day off at her boss' whim or so Janey or John wouldn't have to come in.

Harry Ranko was a sixty-three year old short, wiry man with a shiny bald spot on the top of his head, which seemed to widen daily. Wisps of hair stood out on the sides of his head making him look like an older version of

Bozo The Clown. He was a much-hated man. He knew it, but never let it bother him. He took pleasure in his power over his workers…especially Rosie and demanded too much from her. He laughed and ridiculed her whenever she dared to hint for a raise. "Money's tight!" he bellowed as he glared at her through squinty eyes. He was quick to point out the declining job market and her difficulty in securing another position with a discouraging recommendation from him. She also knew that her age was another strike against her. She never contradicted him or stood up for herself, but instead would sullenly slink back to her duties. She did the books and knew that the business made a large profit. Harry Ranko was as tight as they came where money was concerned. He was too cheap to invest in a decent heating and cooling system or any conveniences, which would make the working environment more enjoyable.

The unusually hot summer made the cramped office almost unbearable, but Rosie kept her feelings locked deep inside and never shared her frustrations with anyone--not even Bart, her faithful husband of thirty years. Bart was a proud man and he'd always been a strong, vibrant man and a good provider. His life had revolved around the small construction company he'd built from the ground up. She'd been happy in those days taking care of the house and doing the books for Bart's company. They'd had it all.

Her blissful world had come to an abrupt halt ten years ago, though, when a construction accident left Bart an invalid at the age of fifty. He'd been reduced to a shell of the man he'd once been. After the accident, she'd been shocked to learn that he'd let their medical insurance policy lapse. His medical care soon ate up all the money in their savings account. She tried to keep the business afloat, but finally had to sell the business knowing that after the bills from the business were paid, they would just about break even. It still wasn't enough. With no other hope, she finally put their house up for sale, sold their valuable possessions, and moved to a tiny shabby apartment in a run down part of the city. But it didn't take long for Bart's medical care to drain that money, too.

Rosie would have to find a job with medical benefits that would hopefully cover Bart, too. She pounded the pavement hoping someone would take a chance on a forty-five year old woman who's only work experience was keeping the books for her husband's now defunct business. Harry Ranko was the only employer who had an opening. She'd jumped at his offer, which included medical benefits. Even with the low rate of pay,

the medical insurance would take a load off of her already too burdened shoulders. She was crestfallen when she learned much too soon that Bart wouldn't be covered under the plan and to include him with his pre-existing problems would have cost more than she made.

She applied for all the help she could get for Bart, but it never was enough. She worked long hard hours and cut every corner she could. She barely made ends meet and she was tired and scared, but no one knew it. All those feelings were locked deep inside. No one ever cared enough to ask. The friends Bart and she had known in their prosperous years, disappeared as soon as they learned of Rosie and Bart's financial ruin. Life was bleak and didn't offer Rosie much hope.

Yesterday she'd typed a request for a wage increase citing her reasons why she desperately needed more money. She'd placed it on Ranko's desk where he'd be sure to see it first thing this morning. When she'd arrived at the office this morning and sat down at her desk, she'd found her request sitting on top of her files with a big red NO!!! scrawled across it. She crumpled the paper and threw it angrily into the wastepaper basket. She prayed daily that somehow Karma would come crashing down on his world. Just once she'd like him to see what her life was like. If only he could walk in her shoes for one day. Maybe then he'd realize how cruel and greedy he was.

Aside from his obvious joy of making his employees' lives miserable, Harry Ranko had one other passion--playing the lottery. He was constantly waiting for the big one and had grandiose plans for his winnings, which he didn't hesitate to share with Rosie. The money he threw away weekly on the lottery would have supported Rosie and Bart for a month. Ranko was already a wealthy man and he made sure everyone he met knew it. He had no sympathy for those less fortunate-the more money he made, the more he wanted, and the less he wanted to part with.

Every Thursday Harry Ranko called Rosie into his office to check the numbers on his tickets. Why he trusted her with this task he'd never said and she'd never asked, but would dutifully enter his office after the others had left for the day. His small beady eyes widened with glee when he learned he had a winner no matter how small the payoff. It was his obsession.

Rosie glanced at the clock. He would be calling her in any minute now to check the numbers. She stood up, walked over to the coffee maker, and

prepared his cup of coffee as she did every Thursday afternoon. She watched closely as his office door slowly opened and he scanned the room. Her eyes met his. He nodded.

She passed through his open door and then closed it behind her. She set his cup of coffee on his desk while he anxiously spread his tickets out.

"I feel lucky today, Rosie."

She smiled as she always did. "Maybe today will be the day you hit the big one, Mr. Ranko." She slowly read the numbers from the morning paper while he scanned his tickets. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead. He smacked his lips together. "Just one more," he mumbled.

Rosie read the second to last number. Sweat trickled down his face. She knew his numbers by heart. He played the same ones week in and week out.

He looked at her, then took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. She already knew whether he had won or not since she'd already checked his numbers, but she wouldn't tell him. It was part of his game.

"I forgot to add the sugar to your coffee, Mr. Ranko. Let me put some in." She reached for his cup.

"First tell me the last number."

"Six."

She took the packet of sugar from her pocket and slowly opened it while he eagerly checked his numbers as beads of fresh perspiration popped out on his head.

He was busy checking the numbers and hadn't seen her take the packet from her pocket. She poured most of the contents of the packet into the cup and slowly stirred his coffee, then slipped the packet back into her pocket. When she removed her hand, she held a lottery ticket of her own.

"All right!" Harry Ranko yelled with glee as sweat poured down his face. "I did it! Rose, I did it!"

Rosie smiled. "How much, Mr. Ranko?" She set his cup in front of him.

"One hundred and fifty million!" he said hoarsely. He took a deep breath and calmed himself as he stared at her. He picked up his coffee cup and held it to his lips. "You have to work and plan for what you want in life, Rosie. Don’t let anyone get in your way. The odds were in my favor to win. It had to happen eventually."

"I suppose you’re right, sir, but I can barely afford one ticket a month."

"The news said there's only one winner." He grinned. "Some are not meant to be wealthy, Rosie," he said as he sipped at his coffee.

"But some of us are, sir." She held her ticket before his eyes.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"I have the big winner, too," she answered calmly.

He laughed. "Impossible. There's only one big winner and I've got it." He drank from the cup, consuming a fourth of it.

"No, I won the one hundred and fifty million dollars, sir."

"What?" His eyes grew wide. "How can that be?"

She picked up his ticket. "This is mine." She laid her ticket in its place.

He started to reach for her. "I'm--" he choked.

She watched as he clutched his chest, the exploding pain she assumed would be like a bolt of lightning striking every fiber of his being. She smiled as he slumped over his desk. She picked up the coffee cup, then looked at him. His opened eyes seemed to be staring through her. She quickly hurried out of the office. She washed the coffee cup, and then set it with the others. She grabbed her purse and locked the office door.

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Rosie kissed her husband's cheek. "I have a surprise for you," she said softly.

Bart looked at her with the same pleading eyes with which he had looked at her for the past ten years. "Please, Rosie. I don't want to live this way," his eyes seemed to say, only he never spoke…he couldn't. The accident had also paralyzed his vocal cords. The doctors had told her it was a miracle he had even lived. But was it? For ten long years he had been unable to function as a human being.

She prepared his liquid meal for him, then sat down before him, picking up his limp hand and gently caressing it. "I have a nice evening planned for you," she said as she sprinkled the remainder of the packet into the drink.

The Stranger

The young girl walked over to the counter of Mac's Diner and promptly seated herself on a stool, keeping an eye on the regular patrons. She propped her elbows on the counter patiently waiting for the lone waitress to notice her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long, honey. What'll you have?" the waitress asked, flipping her order pad to a clean page. "Are your parents here?" She looked around the room for any unfamiliar faces.

The girl looked into her eyes, then flashed her a toothy smile. "I'll have a milkshake, Jenny."

Jenny was caught off guard by the child's familiarity. "I don't believe I've ever met you before. How did you know my name?"

"You never met me, but you knew my daddy."

The waitress frowned. "Where is your father? What's his name?"

"He used to come here all the time when he was on the road driving his truck. He told me all about you and other people in this town. He said it was just about the friendliest place on earth." She smiled again.

Jenny was puzzled. "Is he in the restroom?"

"He's not with me, but he's in the most beautiful place," she replied softly.

"What's his name?" Jenny asked again.

"May I please have my milkshake?"

Jenny sensed something wasn't right. Who did the little girl belong to? Had her parents dropped her off for a shake while they conducted business elsewhere promising to return? Had she been abandoned? She was a beautiful child with long flowing blonde hair, big blue eyes and an infectious smile. "Where's your mother? Who brought you here?" She kept an eye on the child as she made the shake.

The little stranger peered at her, but didn't offer any information.

Jenny finished preparing the shake and set it before her. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Names aren't important, Jenny. It's the friendship that we give to one another that matters in life." She sipped at the milkshake.

"Names are important if you're lost or hurt so your parents can be located. Are you lost, sweetie?" she asked, doubting it since the girl wasn't

upset or crying like a lost child would be. Instead she seemed happy and serene. Something was definitely wrong.

"I'm not lost. I'm where I'm supposed to be."

Jenny gazed again around the now nearly empty diner. "Where do you live?"

"Nowhere now."

Jenny frowned. "You must live somewhere." She was tired of the evasive answers. All she could think about was the anguish the little girl's parents must be feeling right now. "Did you run away? I'm sure your parents must be worried sick about you."

She stared into Jenny's eyes. "They know where I am."

"How old are you?"

"I would have been eight years old last Saturday."

"Would have been?" Jenny lifted an eyebrow.

The child continued to stare at her. "I mean I turned eight years old last Saturday." She finished the shake, took two crumpled bills from her faded jeans pocket, set it on the counter, and then slid off the stool.

"Wait a minute, honey. Please tell me your name and I'll call your parents for you." She couldn't let the child leave the diner and roam the streets alone. She'd never forgive herself if anything happened to the little stranger.

"I could tell you my name and who my parents are, but it wouldn't matter." She smiled again. "They aren't here anymore."

"Well, I can't let you wander off all by yourself," Jenny insisted. "Now you get back on that stool, young lady. If you won't tell me who you are, then I'm calling the sheriff." She was certain that this scare tactic would force the child to reveal her identity.

The girl climbed back onto the stool. "Please call Sheriff Larsen. He can help me."

Jenny's eyes narrowed. "How do you know the sheriff's name? Never mind." She grabbed her cell phone. As she pushed the numbers, she kept her eyes glued on the girl. A customer walked into the diner and sat at the end of the counter. Jenny completed the call, and then looked at the child who sat perched on the stool waiting patiently. "Sheriff Larsen will be here in a few minutes. I've got a customer to wait on so I want you to stay put."

"Okay, Jenny." She continued to smile. "I'll be right here."

A chill crept up Jenny's spine. There was something off about this child. How did she get here? Jenny was certain that she had never seen the girl

before. She had lived in Hemlock Corners for all of her twenty-three years and she knew everyone in this small country town. Who was this child's father? Not many travelers passed through town so there was no way she could know who he was. Wait a minute! The little girl had mentioned that her father was a truck driver. Usually a few truck drivers made a stop at Mac's on their long hauls. She racked her brain trying to remember if any of them had mentioned having a child. None came to mind.

She served her customer and was on her way back to the counter when Sheriff Larsen entered the diner. She hurried over to him, out of earshot of the child, then quickly filled him in on everything the girl had said. Jenny noticed the child staring at them as they talked. When either of them would catch her eye, she flashed her radiant smile in return. After a few minutes, they walked over to her.

Sheriff Larsen sat on the stool next to her. "Jenny tells me that you won't tell her your name or where you come from," he said gently. "Will you tell me?"

"Names aren't important."

"Why are you in Hemlock Corners? Are you visiting someone…maybe your grandmother?"

"No."

He rubbed his jaw. "Who brought you here?"

"My daddy sent me here to give someone a message, Sheriff Larsen."

"Where *is* your father?"

"He couldn't come."

Sheriff Larsen glanced at Jenny. She knew by his expression that he was rapidly losing patience. "Honey, please tell us who you are."

The child peered at them, with the same radiant smile, for a few seconds before speaking. "If you must know, then I'll tell you where my parents are, but please let me deliver the message first."

Sheriff Larsen examined the little girl's features. She looked vaguely familiar to him and he scanned his memory, but couldn't place her. One thing he did know, though, this kid was starting to try his nerves. He was a patient man, but she was pushing him to his limit. "Who's the message for?" his voice was firmer. He hoped his tone would show the child he meant business and was through playing games.

"Jamie Morrison."

Sheriff Larsen maintained his composure even though it was difficult. How the hell did this kid know a punk like Morrison? Maybe he hadn't heard her correctly. "Did you say Jamie Morrison?"

"Yes. Please take me to see him. Time is running out," she begged. "I must see him now."

"How do you know him?"

"That's not important."

The sheriff studied her closely. This was the first time the little girl's smile had faded as her eyes pleaded with his. "I can't do that. Now I'm only going to ask you this one more time…how do you know Jamie Morrison?"

"I don't know him. I've been sent to give him a message."

"Who sent you?"

"Please take me to see him, Sheriff Larsen, before it's too late for him."

Sheriff Larsen looked at Jenny and shook his head. "I'm going to check the computer to see if any alerts have come in on a missing child. Her parents must be frantic wondering where she is. I'll call someone to come and get her until her parents or a guardian can be located."

Jenny nodded. "I'll make sure she stays put."

"Please, take me to him!" The stranger jumped down off the stool and stood in front of him.

He turned his attention back to the child. "I'll be back in a little while. You mind Jenny."

"No! It'll be too late!" she said anxiously, her eyes pleading with him as he turned and walked toward the door.

Jenny was overcome with the child's intense emotions. She was even more alarmed that the little girl was so insistent on seeing Jamie Morrison. What possible connection did she have to him? "Why will it be too late, honey?"

"I won't be here for much longer. I have to go soon."

"You aren't going anywhere, young lady!" Sheriff Larsen insisted.

"Please, Sheriff Larsen, just let me see him now. It'll explain everything. You'll know why I came. Just let me see him."

"What can it hurt, Sheriff?" Jenny said. "Maybe he knows who she is. Then you can contact her parents."

He nodded. "I suppose it won't hurt." He took the child's elbow. "Come on, then. I'll take you to see Jamie Morrison." He led her out of the diner. He kept his hold on her afraid that she might bolt as they walked through

the sparse business district of Hemlock Corners. At the end of Elm Street they turned a corner. Directly in front of them stood a tall old building.

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She knew all along that Jamie Morrison was here. For six long months he had been locked away in a tiny cell in this small rural town accused of a crime he couldn't convince anyone he hadn't committed.

Sheriff Larsen led the child inside the building, then down a long corridor to Jamie Morrison's cell.

"You have a visitor, Morrison," he called.

Jamie looked up from the magazine he'd been reading, sweeping his long hair from his brow. "Yeah, who?"

"This child."

Morrison eyed the little girl. "I don't know her. What is this some kind of a joke, Sheriff?" he asked angrily.

"Mr. Morrison, my daddy asked me to give you a message," she said.

He cocked an eye. "I don't think I know your 'Daddy'."

"You don't, but he knows what's happened to *you*."

"Come on, Sheriff, what's going on?" He glared at the older man. "I don't know her. I've never seen her before."

Sheriff Larsen frowned at the stranger. "Okay, the game's over. I don't know who sent you here, but this is serious business, young lady. Let's go." He took her arm and gently pulled her toward the exit. "I'm going to find your parents."

"No, I do have a message. I can only give it with you here to hear it, too, Sheriff Larsen."

Jamie exhaled loudly. "Let's end this now. What's the message, kid?" He asked impatiently.

She stood in front of the cell and peered at the younger man. "You remember the night it happened, don't you?"

Jamie ran a shaky hand through his hair. "I don't know what you're taking about."

Her eyes grew brighter as she continued to stare at him. "You can't get that night out of your mind."

Sheriff Larsen clamped a hand on the child's arm. "That's enough—"

"No." Jamie interrupted.

The sheriff looked at Morrison. The younger man couldn't seem to pull his eyes from the child's face. He let go of the stranger's arm and moved

back a few steps.

"You can't forget the accident," the girl said softly. "It haunts you."

"How *can* I forget it? I got put into this cage for something I never did!" He rubbed his unshaven face. He continued to stare at his visitor then blinked hard.

Sheriff Larsen noticed how the spell the child had on Jamie seemed to be broken the minute he tore his eyes from hers. She was definitely an odd one, he thought. And the sooner he located her parents, the better. But still, his curiosity was piqued as to who had sent her here. Could she possibly be a relative seeking some sick pleasure out of taunting Jamie Morrison?

She studied the younger man. "My daddy is sorry that it took so long for me to get here. You shouldn't be locked up."

"No kidding, kid. Tell that to the sheriff." He cocked an eye in the sheriff's direction.

"All right, enough of this nonsense. Who's your father? I want you to tell me like you promised," Sheriff Larsen demanded.

She nodded. "Yes, I did promise." She smiled.

Her smile was so bright that Sheriff Larsen could have sworn it lit up the entire room. He stole a glance at his prisoner and by the expression on the man's face knew that he was experiencing the same thing. A shiver ran up his spine.

"My daddy was Luke Rogers. My mommy's name was Sandra and I'm Sarah."

The color drained from Jamie Morrison's face. "What kind of sick joke is this?" he choked.

"This…this can't be," Sheriff Larsen stammered. "Luke Rogers is dead… along with his wife and only child…a daughter. He had no other children. Who really sent you here?"

"I'm Sarah Rogers. I didn't have any brothers or sisters." The girl stared at the two men. "On August 18 we were on our way here. Daddy told us how he stopped here every week and how nice everyone was. That day he was bringing Mommy and me here for a visit and if we liked it as well as he did, we were going to move here. It would have been closer to daddy's work and he wouldn't have to be on the road so much." She pulled a picture from her pocket. "Here. This is us." She thrust it into the sheriff's hand.

The sheriff stared at it for a moment, then swallowed hard. "I . . .I don't understand," he answered slowly shaking his head back and forth. "I don't

understand."

"That's all right," Sarah replied with a knowing smile. "Someday, when your turn comes, you will understand. But right now I'd like to deliver daddy's message."

"Go ahead," the sheriff answered quietly.

Jamie Morrison stared wide-eyed at her frozen to the chair on which he sat.

"Sheriff Larsen, you shouldn't have arrested Mr. Morrison. He didn't kill us. Daddy said that if you check the brakes on the car you will see that they failed. There was no way daddy could get us down that hill. It was too steep and had too many sharp turns. I looked out of the window and saw Mr. Morrison's car just as we went over the side of the hill." Her voice echoed in the stillness of the room. "He didn't run us off the road."

Jamie Morrison broke out into a cold sweat as he clasped his hands tightly together. "I don't understand," he hoarsely whispered. "How can you be here if you were killed in the accident? Who's playing this sick joke on me?"

She smiled. "I was sent here to free you from a crime you didn't commit. I've done my job. I must go now." She turned to walk away.

"Wait a minute! I still don't believe this!" Sheriff Larsen said. "Who are you? Who sent you?"

"Check the brakes, Sheriff Larsen and set Jamie Morrison free."

She turned and rushed down the hall. Sheriff Larsen ran after her, then stopped dead in his tracks. He stared in disbelief at what he saw. He rubbed his eyes, but the vision was still there. At the door, the child stopped, smiled, then waved at him. He watched as she vanished. He couldn't make sense of what he saw. She just vanished into thin air.

He stood frozen to the spot for a few minutes, then looked once again at the picture he still held tightly in his hand. He hurried to his office, pulled open a desk drawer, and retrieved the file on Jamie Morrison. When he opened the file, the face of the little girl smiled back at him from a newspaper clipping. He scanned the report. His hands shook violently as he picked up the clipping and read it. *Sarah Rogers age seven and a half was also killed along with her parents Luke and Sandra Rogers when a car driven by Jamie Morrison of Hemlock Corners forced the Rogers' vehicle off the road at six forty-five last evening.*

It’s Me

I'm walking down the highway, but no one seems to see me or if they do, they don't seem to care. The highway is so busy with cars zooming past. Why doesn't someone stop? Don't they think it odd that a woman would be strolling down a busy highway in the early morning rush hour? Are they so self absorbed that taking a moment to help a stranded motorist is too much to ask? Can't they see that I'm frightened?

I've been walking for hours, but in reality, it's probably only been minutes or even seconds. I'm so tired. How did I end up here on the edge of the highway? Where am I going? Why can't I remember? I need to clear my head and go back to the events of this morning. Yes, that's exactly what I'll do; I'll retrace my steps.

I do remember waking up this morning. I took a shower, then fixed a cup of instant coffee, and grabbed an apple muffin. I have an important meeting this morning. I can't afford to be late. I need to catch the train into the city. I'm driving on this very highway I now find myself walking on. Traffic is almost bumper-to-bumper in spots and if it doesn't start moving soon, I will surely miss my train. I can't miss the train. Not this morning.

This morning at 9:15, I am meeting the head honcho of *Franco Designs*. He will be handing me a substantial check for my fashion designs and at the same time be securing my future. I am signing on as one of their lead designers. At the age of twenty-five I have arrived.

Maybe I'm having some kind of nervous breakdown. No, that can't be it. I'm over tired. That would explain this. I've been under way too much stress for the past six months working day and night on these designs. I practically isolated myself from any kind of social life, but it was worth it. All of my hard work has finally paid off.

I'll turn around and retrace my steps. I don't understand how I got here. Maybe I had a blackout. That would explain this memory loss and make some sense out of my wandering down the highway. Yes, I'm all ready feeling much better about my predicament. I need to find out where I left my car. I must have gotten out and started walking down the road. Maybe if I hurry I can still make the train.

I wish my legs would move faster, but they refuse. If I don't get the train to the city, then my whole career will go down the tubes. I'm walking as fast

as I can. There! Up ahead I see my car! I'm getting closer.

Why are all these people standing around my car? Maybe they are just curious as to why it's been abandoned on the side of the road. No, that doesn't make sense, but it's the only explanation I can think of right now.

I need to push my way through this crowd and get into my car and be on my way. I'm shoving my way past them, but no one is even acknowledging my presence. I'm speaking, but why aren't they responding? Why do they appear as though they are looking right past me? I'm waving my arms. "Hello! Please let me through!"

I'm finally getting to the front of the crowd. There's a police officer holding everyone back. This is getting ridiculous! Wait! Why is my car flipped over onto its roof? I can't believe it! Who vandalized and set fire to my car? Why would someone do this to me?

I'll worry about the car later. How will I get to the train station? Maybe someone in this crowd will be so kind as to give me a lift. I'll ask the policeman if he can assist me. Of course, he'll probably detain me for hours with questions, but they'll be the same questions I have, but have no answers to. At least not yet.

How much time do I have before the meeting? This can't be right. The battery must have died in my wristwatch. It's definitely later than 7:35.

Everyone's now looking at the group of paramedics surrounding a body lying on the grassy ground. Who is it? A paramedic is covering the person's body. I'm sad for the lifeless corpse, but at the same time can't help but wonder why the person was so close to my car? Could it have been the vandal? Did his act of violence end with his own demise? Was this a lesson he needed to learn? I do feel sorry for him, though. What a horrible way for one's life to end and then to be surrounded by all of these strangers who are nothing more than gawking spectators. But then, I suppose that's what they think of me, also.

I need to see this corpse's face. I don't know why, but it almost seems like there is an invisible force compelling me to look.

The covering is just about to be pulled over the face.

I'm peering into the face. An intense feeling of sadness is washing over me. I feel so cold; so terribly cold.

My God! It can't be! The face is mine! I'm looking at me!

I'm Waiting For You

The young woman slowly walked on the shoulder of the busy highway facing traffic. She looked as though she were in a trance. *She has to be aware of the heavy traffic whizzing by. What's wrong with her*? Storm wondered.

She craned her neck for a better view and carefully watched the woman as they sped past. The woman slightly turned her head and smiled. "It's her! God, I wonder what she's doing out on the highway?" she asked her fiancée Will whose eyes were firmly planted on the traffic ahead of him.

"What?" he grunted. "There's no one there, Storm. What are you talking about?" He briefly scanned the side of the road.

Storm ignored his remarks as she settled back into her seat. Her mind stayed focused on the strange woman. She wasn't crazy. When they had passed, Storm had glimpsed a bright smile pasted on the woman's full lips. But how could that be? They were traveling much too fast for her to have picked out such a tiny detail. Was everyone right? Was she slowly losing her mind? No. The woman was real. Just because Will hadn't seen her didn't mean that she hadn't been there.

"Maybe her car has broken down and she's looking for some help. I hope she's all right," Storm said worriedly. "I'd be terrified walking on the road like that."

Will sighed heavily. "Honey, there's no one there. Trust me," he said sympathetically. "You only think someone's there. This vacation is just what we both need. No cares or worries, just some much needed R & R." He squeezed her hand.

She frowned. "Please don't mock me, Will. I can take it from anyone else, but not from you."

"I'm not mocking you, Storm," he answered uneasily. "I'm just worried about you, that's all."

"You sound like my new psychiatrist. You don't believe anything I tell you, do you, Will?" she accused. "You think I'm losing my mind and that is why you insisted we take this trip."

He slowly shook his head back and forth. "It's difficult for me when I don't see what you claim is there." He turned his head and glanced at her. "Why don't you take a nap?"

She frowned again. "She's very real to me."

"I'm worried about you, honey," he said again. "Hasn't it ever occurred to you how this woman you claim to see knows exactly where you'll be at any given moment and then shows up out of the blue? You're the only one who can see her."

"I know," she answered, her voice softening. "I wish you could see what I do. I'm not crazy, Will. Please believe me."

"I never said or thought you were, but I don't see anyone wandering down this highway. There hasn't been anyone walking on this road for the two hours we've been on it." He swallowed hard. "I want you to get better."

"Maybe my mind *is* playing tricks on me," she said, but deep inside she knew what she saw was very real. She wasn't dreaming or imagining this woman.

Storm had seen her share of therapists and then psychiatrists and they all had the same explanation. She knew they were programmed to only believe what could be seen in black and white. Anything out of the ordinary had to be a manifestation in the mind according to their narrow theories. She'd never be able to convince them otherwise.

She knew that Will wanted to believe her and desperately tried to. She also knew that if the situation were reversed she most likely would be having the same doubts about his sanity, but she was grateful that he hadn't bailed out when the strange woman entered her life one day six months ago without warning. Instead, he'd chosen to stay with her. He wanted her for better or worse even though they hadn't yet formally exchanged their wedding vows.

She softly touched the diamond on her finger, relaxed into the seat, closed her eyes, and drifted into a fitful slumber. When she awoke forty-five minutes later, Will had pulled the car to the side of the road. She stretched her cramped muscles.

He smiled at her. "Hi, honey. Did you have a nice rest?"

She caressed his cheek with her fingertips. "Yes," she lied. Her dreams had been invaded with the woman's image.

"Are you hungry?" He pulled a sandwich from a sack and thrust it towards her. "Tuna on rye…your favorite."

She took the sandwich and hungrily ate in silence.

"It's a beautiful day, Storm. Why don't we find a walking trail? We haven't taken a walk together in ages."

Her face brightened. "Do we have time?"

He shrugged. "We're not on a schedule. The hotel will still be there when we get there," he said with a wide grin. "This is our time together, remember?"

She smiled. "Let's go then." She gazed at the beautiful lush green countryside. "Some good old fashioned exercise will do me more good than the pills the doctor prescribed."

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Later Storm stood at the top of a hill inhaling the fresh clean air before lying down on her back in the warm soft grass. Will sprawled next to her slipping an arm under her neck.

She studied the clouds. "Remember when we were kids and we'd describe what the cloud formations looked like?"

He nodded.

"Look at that cloud," she giggled. "It looks like a pig. See the snout?"

He laughed. "Yeah, it does. Hey, look, that one's a bulldog."

She chuckled finding her body relaxing as the warm afternoon sun beat down on them.

Will shifted his body to a more comfortable position. "Okay, the next one's yours."

"Hmmm…let's see." She studied the formation for a few seconds, and then froze. She sharply sucked her breath in.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Will asked anxiously, peering at her. "Are you ill?"

She opened her mouth, but no words would come. Her vocal cords were paralyzed with fear. She feebly pointed to the sky.

Will studied the cloud formation. "What's the matter, Storm? I don't see anything unusual."

"It's her," she finally choked. "She's here. Look, Will. Tell me you see her," she pleaded.

He stiffened. "No. There's no one here, Storm. Just the two of us."

Her eyes stayed riveted on the sky. "There. She's there." She trembled. "You have to see her!" she cried.

Will pulled himself to a sitting position, then reached for her hands gently pulling her up next to him. "Honey, is it time for your medication?"

"No," she adamantly stated. "I'm not having delusions, Will. I wish there was some way I could prove to you that this woman *is* real. I don't know

what she wants or why she has chosen to follow me."

"Why are you so afraid now, Storm? You've been talking about her off and on for the past six months and you've never been afraid. Why is it different now?"

She shook her head back and forth. "I don't know. I don't think I can explain it…there's something about the look in her eyes as though she's trying to tell me something. Something's going to happen. I feel it." She shivered.

"Like something supernatural?"

"Please, Will, don't make fun of me."

"I'm not, honey. I only want you to get well. I'm afraid for you."

"You do think I'm losing my mind, don't you." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

He lowered his eyes and stared at his hands. "No. I feel helpless because I can't help you. Tell me what I can do. I love you so much."

She touched his cheek. "Just keep loving me, Will. Please don't ever stop loving me. I know someday I'll figure out what's going on."

He wrapped his strong arms around her. "I'll never stop loving you so don't worry about that," he murmured against her soft hair. "Let's get back to the car."

They walked hand in hand down the trail to the car. After they were settled in, Will started the engine and cautiously drove toward the edge of the road waiting for a break in the traffic before easing onto the highway.

"Will! Watch out!" Storm screamed.

He slammed on the brakes. "What's wrong?" His hands trembled on the steering wheel.

Storm swallowed hard as she met the woman's kindly eyes. As her eyes locked with the woman's, a sudden peacefulness enveloped her and she no longer felt any fear toward this stranger. "The woman," she whispered. "She's so beautiful."

"Honey, there's no one here! You could have gotten us killed! What if I would have all ready pulled out into traffic?"

The woman drew closer extending a hand. Storm quickly opened the car door and stepped out.

"What the hell are you doing, Storm? Get back into the car!"

Storm followed the woman to the edge of the road trying to reach the woman's outstretched hand.

"Storm!" Will yelled jumping out of the car. He reached for her arm just as her hand gripped the woman's soft hand.

"She wants me to go with her, Will. Don't worry…everything will be okay now."

"Who?" he asked with tears streaming down his face. "There's no one here, but us." He helplessly looked around. "Please get back into the car, Storm. You need to go to the hospital," he pleaded.

The woman pulled Storm closer to her. "Don't be afraid. I've been waiting for you, Storm. It's time for you to come home. I've been preparing your new home for you and Will. Come see."

"What about Will? Shouldn't he come, too?"

"I want to show it to you first. You can come back for him after."

Storm smiled. She'd never felt so peaceful and serene in her life. She turned and flashed a bright smile at Will. "It'll be okay, honey. I'm going to see our new home. Wait for me…I'll be back."

"Storm, I'll take you home if that's what you want. I'll do anything, but please get back into the car." He grabbed for her arm, but she slipped out of his grasp.

He watched in horror as she ran into the path of an oncoming tractor-trailer. "Stop!" he screamed. The tires squealed as the driver tried to swerve. Will stood helplessly by as Storm's petite body was destroyed in front of his eyes. "No! Storm!"

The semi driver, ashen faced, jumped from the cab. "What was she doing?"

Will covered his face with his hands. "Why?" he moaned. Why?"

"It wasn't my fault. You know that," the driver said in a shaky voice. "I'll call for help." He jumped back into the cab of the truck.

Will felt a soft hand on his shoulder. He turned and looked into Storm's eyes. He momentarily froze, then wiped the tears from his eyes. "What's going on?" he mumbled. "I thought you…I mean I saw…"

She held out her hand. "It's time for us to go home, Will."

He stumbled toward the road. "The car."

She shook her head. "We don't need the car anymore, Will."

He touched her hand feeling an intense serenity settling over his body.

"Are you all right, Buddy? Who are you talking to?" the driver asked, walking towards him.

"Don't you see her?" Will asked with a bewildered look on his face. "She's not dead. You didn't kill her."

The man's legs weakened. "I didn't mean to. It was an accident." He wiped the sweat from his brow. "An ambulance should be here soon. You need to get checked out. You must be in shock."

"No," Will said in a calm voice. "I've never felt better." He walked toward Storm. "I thought I'd lost you forever."

She smiled. "We'll never be apart. The woman, the one I kept seeing, she was sent to bring us to our new home."

Will nodded.

"Come, honey. Take my hand."

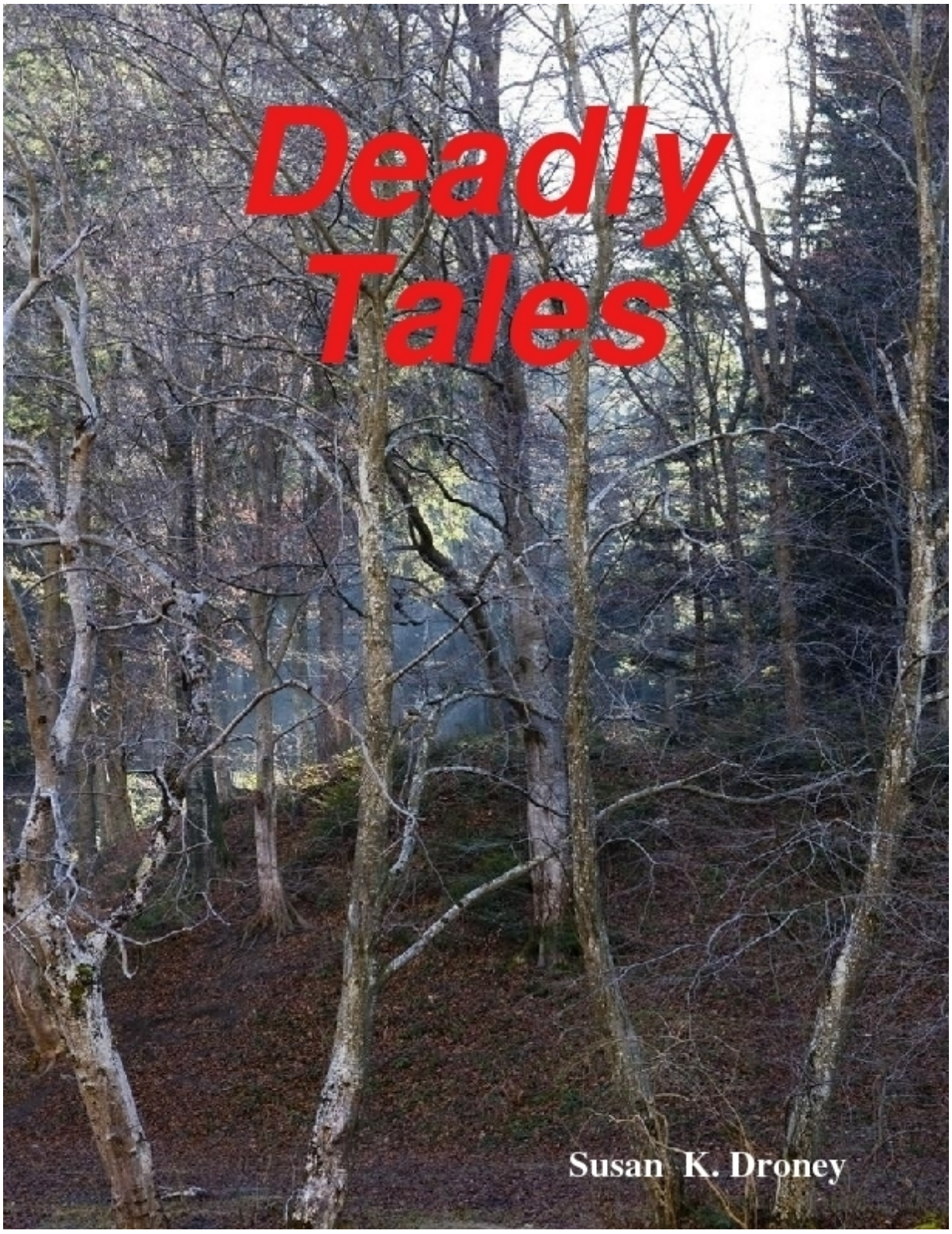
Will grasped her hand.

"What are you doing?" the truck driver screamed as Will deliberately walked into the path of an oncoming car. He watched in disbelief as Will's body was smashed on the pavement. He ran to the side of the truck and vomited as sirens wailed in the distance.

Storm kissed Will's cheek. "I've been waiting for you, darling."

About The Author

Susan K. Droney is the author of many novels, short stories and articles. She resides in New Jersey. Visit her website at http://www.susandroney.com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